

BETTER GO FISH

Rain drizzled onto Ryker's deep-blue raincoat, a gift from his grandfather on his seventeenth birthday. On days like these, cloudy, rainy, with a cold breeze and rocking waves, the weather was perfect for fishing.

Although he had grown used to fishing alone since his father fell ill, he still wished they could go out one last time.

Ryker fastened a lump of bait onto the fishhook and cast it a few metres out. It landed with a satisfying plop. His friends had accompanied him once or twice before, but they always seemed more interested in swimming and drinking than fishing. To Ryker, fishing was therapeutic; it gave him time to think. But too much time, and his mind would drift to regrets and his father's illness. But it was almost as if the fish knew when to bite, snapping him back to reality with the thrill of reeling.

Placing the premium fishing rod in its holder, Ryker noticed that the wind had carried the boat away from the prime cod spot. He leaned back to start the outboard engine, but before he could, the rod bent and swayed furiously, nearly popping out of the holder.

With haste, Ryker threw himself forward, grabbed the rod, and hooked it to his fish harness. He heaved, reeled, and grunted in rhythm, fighting whatever was on the other end of the line. It resisted frantically, pulling downward with immense strength. The rod threatened to snap. Ryker had never encountered a fish like this; it had to be massive.

It tugged violently, dragging Ryker towards the edge of the boat. He braced his feet defensively, pushing back with all his strength. The rod bent into an impossible arc. He had to reel this beast in.

“One foot on the edge, the other beneath you.” He could hear it, his father’s voice. Oh, how he wished he were here. “Straighten your back, focus now! Pull and reel, come on! Again. Pull and reel, son!”

Ryker roared, his muscles screaming for relief, but the thrill was too strong.

He reeled again, and a moment later, something broke through the deep blue surface, a massive fin, larger than any he’d seen before. A tuna? Here? It couldn’t be. They didn’t come this close to shore.

The battle continued. He was so close, just a few more pulls. He heaved, and—

A long, thin spear pierced the surface. It wasn’t a tuna. It was a swordfish, larger than any he’d ever seen. Twice the size of the tallest man he knew.

It glanced at him, eyeing him as though sizing up its opponent. Then, with a sudden burst of power, it dived straight down.

Ryker tried to brace for the pull but stood no chance. The rod, still secured to his harness, wrenched forward, dragging him into the ice-cold water.

He struggled to free himself, but the harness held tight. The surface light faded as he was pulled deeper. Bubbles burst from his mouth; he wanted to scream, but all he could manage was a gurgle.

He fought against the straps in vain. The water pressed in from all sides, forcing him down. The sea rejected him; this was no place for humans. Yet still, he sank.

His lungs burned. His limbs felt heavy. His thoughts raced but made no sense. Was this it? His tears mixed with the sea, his final breath slipping away.

At least his father would join him soon. They could fish again. The thought made him smile.

Instinctively, his arms wrapped around himself, knees curling up. His mind drifted, slow, foggy, fading.

A sharp pain jabbed his right hand. His knife.

A surge of panic shot through him. What was he doing? He had to get out.

He grasped the knife and slashed at the harness, but it was too thick. Turning to the taut fishing line, he made a desperate, sweeping cut.

The line snapped. The force pulling him down disappeared, leaving him spinning in the depths.

Which way was up? He picked a direction and kicked. One stroke. Another. It felt like both hours and seconds at the same time.

He couldn't hold on any longer. His body demanded air.

Saltwater filled his lungs, burning like fire. His throat clenched, trying to keep more from entering. His mind dimmed. With his last ounce of strength, he swam.

Up. Up.

The light shimmered above him, so close.

Then everything went black.

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Ryker's eyelids felt like stone, too heavy to lift. His body was numb, as if it no longer belonged to him. Where was he? What had happened?

Someone spoke nearby, but he couldn't make out the words. He felt sick, like he needed to heave, to gasp for air, to curl up in pain, yet he could do nothing.

All he could do was sleep.

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"Son, are you there?"

His father's voice. A hand on his shoulder.

It took more effort than anything before, but Ryker forced his eyes open. The world spun. He tried to sit up.

"Oh, no, no, lie down, son. It's a miracle you survived." His father's face was blurred, but Ryker could still make out his square jaw and sharp lips.

Ryker tried to speak but managed only a muffled sound.

"Don't worry, son. You'll be alright. The doctors said you've caught an extreme case of decompression sickness, but you survived." His father almost sounded proud.

"D-Dad... I was." Ryker tried to push the words out with all his strength.

"It w-was huge." Ryker finally managed to mutter, smiling weakly.

His father smiled back.

Grapes & Tote Bags

Green or red? It's always a struggle, not a big one, but still. Green is savoury and sour, perfect for a warm day with a smiling sun. Yet, today was a bit cloudy, and the wind had picked up.

Red grapes have always been a refreshing comfort food for me on gloomy days. But they're also perfect for when I feel bougie. I guess it has something to do with emperors and pharaohs being fed grapes straight from the vine in movies and paintings.

I'm going to be a bit wild and go for green. It's not perfect, but who's going to stop me?

As I sauntered over to the register, the old woman, with her wrinkled, evil eyes, gave me a questioning look as I placed the only product in my basket in front of her: my plump, green grapes. I liked to think I was good at picking grapes, but she didn't seem to agree.

"That'll be £2.50. Card or cash?" she said, as if she hated me, each word laced with a poisonous sting.

What had I done? Gone for green grapes on a cloudy day? I pulled out my card and placed it on the machine without saying a word. Better not say anything to her; she might just put a curse on me or turn me into a frog.

A ding later, the grapes were mine, and I shoved them into my tote bag.

I have mixed feelings about grocery shops. They are inviting yet purposefully confusing, and they have everything except the one thing you need. I like perusing them, but today, I wanted nothing more than to get out of that labyrinth. So, with my bag over my shoulder, I walked briskly towards the exit and left the building with a smile on my face because I had grapes.

A firm hand grabbed my shoulder; it belonged to a security guard.

Colin swept another item over the register, and a satisfying ding popped from the machine. How could anyone hate this job?

Being a cashier wasn't his original plan; he wanted to be a signwriter, but somehow, it had become his dream job. From meeting new people to placing and sorting wares, it made something within him buzz, as if he were a worker bee and the store was his queen and hive.

"Do you want a bag with that?" Colin asked the elderly man who was about to pay for so many sausages that Colin wasn't sure there were any left. The old man opted for the bag and packed his stuff.

Hilda sat at the register opposite Colin. The old woman was his favourite coworker. She was both a friend and a grandmother, offering him a snack in the middle of his shift every day without fail.

A young woman walked peculiarly up to Hilda's register, placing only a single pack of green grapes on the conveyor belt.

Green grapes in weather like this? The strange look on her face only added to the oddness. It looked as if she despised Hilda; how could anyone despise Hilda?

She paid for the grapes, shoved them into her tote bag, and walked out, nearly jogging.

No way she brought a tote bag just for a pack of grapes; she could have carried them in her hands.

With a swift motion, Colin pulled the walkie fastened to his shoulder towards his mouth and pressed the second button, the one connected to security.

“A young woman carrying a tote bag is acting suspiciously. I think she might have stolen something. She just left the store.”

Colin wasn't Employee of the Month for nothing.

MAUSOLEUM OF PASTS

A tower stretched from the green grass as if reaching for the stars. Vines and cracks betrayed its age, stones were missing, and moss clung to rotting wood. It had weathered countless storms. Yet it stood proudly over the hill, a beacon of history, a memory of what once was.

All carpenters, stonemasons, and architects who contributed to its creation had their names lost in time. Yet even nameless, their work filled generations with awe. Their mastery became an impossible milestone that many have strived to reach.

The tower evoked legends and myths; it was like nothing else, perched alone atop an isolated hill far from any settlement. Historians and scientists alike have failed to uncover any sensible reason for its existence. Faith named it the Spear of Gods, and after its rediscovery, it became a common stop for pilgrims.

Most believe the grey old tower to be a bridge to the afterlife, that all who are born travel through it. A gateway between life and death, the start and the end. As such, strict rules against touching the tower were established. Losing a couple of fingers or a hand was a mild punishment for those who disobeyed. It hasn't been touched in ages; the skull of the last who did still lies cemented to the ground as a reminder.

All monarchs must bend the knee before the tower, for without its blessing, their kingdoms would crumble. Unlike the scholars, the Crownkeepers study the tower for its reactions: how it sways in the wind, how it creaks when a king or queen rules. These signs are taken as judgment. All monarchs fear the tower's disapproval, for if it ever rejects a ruler, they will be dethroned, or, in the worst cases, imprisoned.

Every last piece of frail stone and dull, splintered roof tile is sacred. If you see it on a clear day, you have its favour. But if you glimpse it on a foggy morning or the darkest night, you might just be blessed.

An ancient tower, the most powerful thing in existence, rests atop a lonely hill. None dare enter its cold interior, where rotting wood, mouse-bitten books, and crumbling stairs remain untouched. Its secrets are too sacred to learn; its history too obscure to reveal its purpose. Its past will crumble with it, for none dare repair it.